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Lady Bustamante and Emancipence

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**Martin Henry, Contributor**

Lady Bustamante's passing, and in the Emancipence season at that, provides an opportunity to ask critical questions about how the struggles to which she devoted her life, much of it beside Sir Alexander, have turned out, and why they have not yielded better results. Sir Alexander himself made a well-timed passing on Independence Day itself, August 6, in 1977.

As Senator Dwight Nelson discussed the life of Lady Bustamante on radio last Monday morning, one of the issues which came up was how little young people know of the nation's history and its struggles, and how little was actually recorded for them.

While governor general, Sir Howard Cooke and I discussed the same matter on several occasions, giving thought to a project to write popular history. Funding was the big obstacle.

When Dwight Nelson was asked about the Government using the Jamaica Information Service and the new Public Broadcasting Corporation of Jamaica to spearhead some of this necessary work, the usual lack-of-resources answer was given.

When Alexander Clarke was born in 1884, only 46 years had passed since 'full free' had been granted to slaves in the British Empire in 1838. National Independence was even further away in the future - 78 years. Clarke-Bustamante proudly claimed some Arawak ancestry and to this day, many Jamaicans do have distinctive Amerindian features, from the absorption of Arawakan genes into the incoming populations. But Busta's grandparents could easily be a mix of slaves and slave owners. Bustamante has done more than any other Jamaican, with the possible exception of his cousin Norman Manley, for Jamaicans in the majority to realise the aspirations of Emancipation and nationalism. And nobody gave stronger support to Busta than Gladys Longbridge-Bustamante.

Religious and deeply Christian

While Jamaicans are more likely nowadays to celebrate Emancipation with bashment, the first Emancipation was deeply religious and deeply Christian. The non-conformist chapels and meeting houses were crammed with worshippers awaiting the stroke of midnight, marking the dawn of a new day.

Sam Sharpe, who did not survive to see the 'part free' Emancipation of 1834, deeply understood the theological grounding of freedom. That great scribe and embellisher of the freedom struggle, Philip Sherlock, with Hazel Bennett, noted in **The Story of the Jamaican People**, "The Christian doctrines of the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of all human beings, the call to personal salvation, the valuation of the human soul as precious beyond price in the sight of God, were revolutionary concepts in the world of the sugar and slave plantation."

It was, therefore, extraordinarily refreshing to read a newspaper editorial noting that while "this nation has, in its relatively young history, created a significant legislative legacy", the laws seem impotent to protect our children. So, "do we begin to take a long, hard look at our society with a view to realising the elements within it that condone, indeed flaunt, the immorality that our children are now playing out? Blinded by moral relativism that is nothing short of hypocritical, we turn simple issues into noisy debates about everything, except the fact that children live what they learn."



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Bustamante was extraordinarily protective of children - and women - hence the naming of the children's hospital in his honour.

Central to the struggle for freedom and personal independence was the desire for land and the ability to bargain for fair wages. Sherlock tells us in another earlier work, **West Indian Nations: A New History**, that "the struggle of the blacks for land, 'my own piece of ground', was part of his struggle for freedom. Land meant ownership, moving out of a position of being owned into one of possessing property, of controlling and managing it for one's own benefit. The effort did not begin when he was set free."

There are legendary stories and pretty good empirical data on how the slaves were vastly more productive in their own time and on their own allotted garden plots than working for the estate. Unfortunately, a good deal of the attitude and strategies of soaking the system by passive sabotage has survived into independent Jamaica.

Land hunger, which has morphed into hunger for house ownership in a post-agricultural economy, is as strong as ever today for the same reason of personal freedom and independence being anchored in property ownership. One of the biggest reasons that Jamaicans want to own their own homes, even when rent is cheaper, is so that no landlord can tek step wid dem. Few other of my columns in 22 years of writing have ever prompted the kind of supportive outpouring that "Real-estate distortions" of June 28 has.

Seventy-one years after that historic year of labour agitations, 1938, out of which Alexander Bustamante arose as leader, Jamaican workers are in the main poorly compensated when salaries are measured against the cost of living, particularly big ticket non-consumables, like housing and education. The economy is sluggish and now back in the arms of the International Monetary Fund for life support. Worker productivity has not improved significantly since Busta died in 1977 - conditions for which the labour movement cannot be absolved of all responsibility.

The country asked Sir Alexander, at 78, and his Jamaica Labour Party, to lead it into Independence. In presenting the Five-Year Independence Plan, 1963-1968, his young Minister of Development and Welfare, Edward Seaga, told the Parliament and nation, with Lady Bustamante sitting in the visitors' gallery of the House, "We have chosen to call this our Five-Year Independence Plan because the plan puts forward proposals designed to orientate the Jamaican society towards the roles that are necessary consequences of Independence. [And] in order to do this, we must look back particularly into our history."

There followed a crisp *tour de force* of the country's history. The plan identified "cultural, social and economic problems [note the Seaga order] to which this country must address itself as problems of immediacy and urgency. And then it was announced, "It is those problems that the Five-Year Plan has approached from a viewpoint of systematically organising the use of our resources and aiming them at achieving the qualified targets."

Using that plan as a checklist for evaluation, it cannot be difficult to assess how well we have done since Lady Bustamante stood by her husband's side in the brand new National Stadium watching the Union Jack come down and the green black and gold unfurling, signalling, hardships there will be, but the land is green and the sun shineth.

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